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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, EUR/ACE, SCA/PPD, ECA

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: MINISTRY OF EDUCATION CRITICIZES FLEX
PROGRAM

11. (SBU) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Ministry of Education (MOE) alleged, via diplomatic note and in a meeting with PAO, that the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program for high school students was not being properly supervised by ACCELS. MOE Minister Annaamanov claimed the fact that some children changed families or had to return to Turkmenistan was proof of problems with the program. He suggested that the program be limited and that MOE vet the host families. The content and tone had all the hallmarks of Head of MOE International Relations Nury Bayramov, long-time nemesis of U.S. and other Western educational programs, and the person who conducted the investigation into FLEX. We know President Berdimuhamedov wants more U.S. educational exchanges, which may have once again energized the anti-Western Bayramov to try to prove a program like FLEX is flawed. We will push back vigorously, but at the same time we recommend ACCELS be more forth-coming with information about its programs.
END SUMMARY.

DIPLOMATIC NOTE

13. (SBU) On the morning of February 14, the government of Turkmenistan sent a diplomatic note to the Embassy which criticized the FLEX program and its management under ACCELS. [NOTE: Although it is now the American Councils for International Education, the organization is still known in Turkmenistan by its former name, ACCELS. END NOTE.] Specifically it claimed that ACCELS (the administrator of the FLEX program) was negligent in selecting host families for the 65 Turkmen high school students sent to the U.S. this school year. In particular, the Ministry of Education cited the two students who had to change host families, and two who returned early. The Ministry complained that it had not been informed about the two early returnees. The dipnote also suggested reducing the program to 50 students total for the 2008-2009 academic year. (NOTE: Under former President Niyazov, MOE frequently tried to limit FLEX program to 50 students. END NOTE.)

14. (SBU) The diplomatic note arrived at the Embassy around the same time that post's PAO departed for an Embassy-requested meeting with the Minister of Education. Minister Annaamanov, accompanied by

Bayramov, opened the meeting with the criticism of FLEX and how ACCELS administers the program. His complaints echoed the diplomatic note, but also carried additional concerns and a suggestion that MOE vet the host families. [COMMENT: This would be impossible. END COMMENT.]

15. (SBU) The Minister explained that after two students returned early, his Ministry (NOTE: specifically Nury Bayramov according to independent information. END NOTE.) undertook an investigation of the living conditions of current FLEX students in the United States. The Minister frequently referred to a typed report held in Bayramov's hands with key points highlighted.

INCORRECT CLAIMS

16. (SBU) Minister Annaamanov made the following points:

-- The Minister claimed (incorrectly) that Turkmen parents had no idea who their children were staying with in the United States, saying that many parents had contacted MOE asking for help in finding their students in the U.S. (COMMENT: This is surely a fabrication, because the opposite is true -- many FLEX parents reported recent contact by MOE asking for information on their children's U.S. host families. END COMMENT.)

-- Annaamanov had the false impression that there was no process for careful selection of host families, citing the case of an early returnee who cycled through four host families before she was sent home. (NOTE: ACCELS made a good-faith effort to help that student adjust, but her behavioral problems eventually led to her early return. END NOTE.)

-- The Minister also said that ACCELS had refused to provide

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information on the host families. However, this was the first such request from the Ministry.

-- Annaamanov suggested that MOE should have a role in selecting host families.

-- The Minister believed that a student who returned early for health reasons was a sign that there was no health screening for FLEX participants. (NOTE: The selection process includes thorough health screening. The returnee had concealed health information which would have disqualified his participation in FLEX, had it been discovered. END NOTE.)

17. (SBU) PAO clarified much of the incorrect information presented in the meeting, but acknowledged that ACCELS should have provided information on the two early returnees, and should be reasonably responsive to the Ministry's requests. PAO also noted possible privacy concerns about releasing certain information on American citizen families, but promised to examine the issue. PAO also stressed that the information provided by the "investigation" gave the Minister a misleading impression, and encouraged the Minister to hear from FLEX alumni directly who would universally praise their year-long experience in the U.S.

THE SILVER LINING

18. (SBU) In a significant contrast to past practice, this discussion did not derail the entire meeting. Minister Annaamanov seemed to accept that there could be another side to the story and toned down his complaints. His final words on FLEX stressed that he wanted to be sure that it was an effective program and to be sure that the students were properly cared for. The remainder of the meeting was more productive and ended on a positive note.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: The attack on the FLEX program is reminiscent of past practice and has Nury Bayramov's fingerprints all over it. Even the phrasing used by Minister Annaamanov was similar to that used by the previous Minister of Education who was also fed bad information by Bayramov. Our suspicion is that given President Berdimuhamedov's emphasis on more exchanges, Bayramov and MOE may be under pressure to show why that is not happening. This

investigation into FLEX may have been an attempt to find negative information to justify limiting the program. That said, sharing basic information about the host families as well as providing reasons why children change families and (especially) have to return home makes sense. ACCELS providing correct information, before MOE is able to manufacture it, would be in the best long-term interest of the program. END COMMENT.

¶10. (SBU) On February 15, Foreign Ministry Americas Director Serdar Bashimov (who has a son on the FLEX program in Ohio) recommended to the Charge - strictly off the record - that the Embassy push back hard against Bayramov. He noted the diplomatic note had only "suggested" the number of participants be cut from 63 to 50.

¶11. (SBU) CHARGE'S COMMENT: Contrary to a rumor we reported previously, we are told Bayramov is not/not a personal friend of the President. While he must have protection from somewhere, he's simply one of those arrogant bureaucrats that exists in any system who pushes his own agenda, which in his case is old-guard anti-Western. As long as he is in place, we will have to work with him, as distasteful as he is. I recommend ACCELS be as forthcoming as legally possible. For example, it seems basic that the name of the high school and names/professions of the host families should be given to the Ministry of Education at the beginning of each school year. When there are problems that necessitate the early return of a student, a report should be presented to the Ministry. Further, ACCELS should remind the MOE, through MFA Protocol, of regularly scheduled program events in Turkmenistan. On February 16, Bayramov disrupted TOEFL testing in Ashgabat, claiming the MOE had not been notified in advance. In fact, ACCELS had given the full year's schedule in October 2007. But given local conditions, that's probably not good enough. For public events like testing or

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interviewing, the ACCELS country director, along with the Embassy's Public Affairs section, should remind the MOE via MFA Protocol two weeks in advance. END CHARGE'S COMMENT.
HOAGLAND